A

VINDICATION

OF

THEOLOGY:

BEING AN

Address to Theological Students,

BY

J. CLARK MURRAY, L.L.D.,

PROFESSOR OF MENTAL AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY,

McGILL COLLEGE, MONTREAL.

Montreal:

DAWSON BROTHERS, PUBLISHERS.

1877.

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COLLECTION *of* CANADIANA



Queen's University at Kingston

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TO THE

THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS OF MONTREAL.

Some recent utterances in this city seem to call for a vindication of the rank which theology claims among the higher spheres of intellectual labor. I should have liked to write something specially bearing upon the recent utterances to which I refer; but as circumstances made this impossible at present, I have thought it worth while to print, with a few necessary alterations of expression, a discussion of the subject which I had prepared for a different occasion. In dedicating it to you, I may explain that it was written seventeen years ago, at the close of my academical curriculum, and delivered, as a valedictory address, to a Theological Society in Edinburgh, of which I had the honor to be president. You must take the address with all the juvenility of thought and expression by which it is characterized: I should like it to be read as the speech of a student of theology to his fellow students in vindication of their common studies.

J. Clark Murray.

Montreal, March, 1877.

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A VINDICATION OF THEOLOGY.

GENTLEMEN,—It is proverbially impossible to find anything fresh in addresses that recur regularly on the same occasion every year; and to avoid tiring you with the repetition of commonplace valedictory sentiments, I feel tempted to enter on the discussion of some question coming within the range of the science, to the study of which our Society is devoted. But I fear that such a course, while it might possibly have resulted in a performance as tiresome as any commonplace, would expose me to the charge of having in reality shirked the duty which you have done me the honor of imposing upon me. For I cannot feel that our present meeting is intended to be a mere repetition of the ordinary meetings of the session: rather, with the session now behind us, and wishing to realize that its work is over, we seem to me in the position of the man who is not unwilling to spend an hour in contemplating a piece of work he has just finished before he gathers his energies for a fresh achievement. It might, therefore, be thought that the hour during which we are together here this evening would not be thrown away if I asked you to linger for a little over the memory of what we have done. For me, indeed, such a course possesses a fascination which it will not hold out to most of you, inasmuch as the close, which we are now celebrating, of the session that is passing away, is also for me the period of transition from the life of a student to the doubtful life which is to follow. With the myriad-toned voices of a decennium of student-life coming to me out of the past, I might be pardoned were I to demand that you should listen to the notes of wisdom which they bear to us, and catch

the influence of their elevating strains. But many circumstances combine to destroy the charm which might otherwise induce us to luxuriate amid those mingled feelings which gather around our memories of all that is forever gone. It is unfortunate for the teachings of each session, as it passes away, that, however desirable it may be to pause before leaving it altogether, that we may gather from it the wisdom of reflection, the season of the year at which our work comes to a close is too far out of unison with the melancholy which tinges all thoughts of the past to allow any lingering among them unnecessarily. When the first joyous utterance of the opening spring is already reaching us in its earliest songs ; when already

> " A brighter emerald twinkles in the grass,
> A purer sapphire melts into the sea,"

is it to be expected that we should be able so to isolate ourselves from the new life which is throbbing through all, and in the re-awakening joy of which all else is rejoicing, as to force from ourselves those tears which only

> " Rise in the heart and gather to the eyes
> In looking on the happy *autumn* fields,
> And thinking of the days that are no more ?"

Instead, therefore, of leading you back on the past session, or past sessions, I shall ask you to take a glance forward to the life which all of us probably hope to enter sooner or later ; for it may help to present us with a purer ideal of our mission, and with a stronger impulse to fulfil it, if we endeavor to set before us at once the perennial import of that mission, and its special relation to the wants and the strivings of the present time. No man of strong and earnest spirit can enter the ministry merely because it chances to be a traditional sphere of activity for religious spirits; and none can, therefore, avoid a combat with the doubts upon this subject which the varying conditions of human life, within and without the Church, suggest in every age. Are

not the restraints, which the clerical profession imposes, such as to compel a man, if he would live the divinest life possible in his time, to seek a sphere independent of these restraints? Can divine truth be spoken from the pulpit any longer as it ought to be spoken in the years into which our little histories have been thrown? Called to face and to answer these questions for myself, I may best accomplish the purpose which I have in view at present by endeavoring to sketch the destiny of the true divine, and to indicate how it may be still realized in the capacity of a professional divine as nobly as in any other.

We are come into human history at a time when every day is making it clearer to men's minds that all the professions and sects, all the divisions of thought and activity into which men separate, are comparatively indifferent to the purposes of man's destiny. It is growing less and less the custom that a man should anxiously search out what seems to be the purest sect, and then abandon himself to mere special pleading for it; and, in the choice of an occupation, the number is becoming smaller of those who pitch on what they deem the most dignified profession, and delude themselves into the conceit that its dignity must ennoble them, however ignobly its duties may be performed. The conviction is now growing among all earnest souls, that every man should throw himself into that position where the conflict with evil seems most to require a fresh combatant, confident that, with whatever conventional name he may have been dubbed by friends or foes, the eternal worth of his work cannot thereby be altered or lost. If this is a right reading of the indications of our time; if, further, this is a proof that men are learning to estimate each other more purely according to the truth of things,—then, in attempting to picture the form in which a truly divine life may yet be fitly lived in our profession, we must free ourselves from every tendency of thought or feeling which would invest that profession with any real sacredness that is not won for it by the sacred character of its members. All attempts to find the permanent good of humanity in anything but the noble lives of God-serving men must be utterly resisted; and such resistance is all

the more necessary that the voices of the wise are still often drowned in the babble about ecclesiastical and political constitutions, in which churchmen and statesmen alike become oblivious of the fact that the most perfect polity is worthless without men by whom it can be effectively wrought. It is mournful to see even scholarly men torturing themselves, and other simpler souls, with fears lest, if we lose Presbytery or Episcopacy, or some other pet scheme of government in Church or State, the organization of human society must break up into universal anarchy and ruin. There would indeed be an alarming probability of such a ruinous torrent of anarchy sweeping away all the accumulated fruits of human civilization, if the only barrier against it were any of the human inventions for government, however cunningly devised; but it is comforting to believe that the tree on which these splendid fruits have grown strikes its roots into that soil of the Eternal Heavens from which man's nature draws its immortal food.

Gentlemen, is it an altogether superfluous question for us, whether the prospects which we are cherishing, and the plans which we are forming, are calculated to save us from the dissipation of our energies in such ill-directed efforts as those to which I refer? Have we no lingering belief that some favorite church machinery, especially if it is associated with opinions which have been long voted orthodox, will be sufficient to accomplish the world's regeneration? If we have emancipated ourselves from such convictions; if we are filled with the conviction that the world can be bettered, that the cause of God and His Christ can be advanced, only by true men,—then we must go back on the nature which God has given us to learn from it what we are capable of being, and what we are destined to be. The *true man* is he who has persisted in excluding from his God-given nature every extraneous corruption, who has endeavored to let that nature develop itself as God intended it to do. We must, therefore, seek in the development of that nature for the true destination—the chief end—of man. Be not surprised that you are brought back to the first question which our earliest catechism taught us to put

to ourselves; for the nearer we advance towards the realization of its true answer, we find that we have but distantly descried its high significance. Every man who strives practically to solve the question will find that he is ever failing to exhaust the meaning of his solution; and, therefore, when the question is answered in the form stated above, you will not be startled into the suspicion that I am departing altogether from that statement of man's destination in which we have been taught from early childhood to reply to this enquiry. My aim, at least, has been merely to express the meaning of that answer as it unfolded itself to my own mind; and, in truth, if the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever, tell me wherein that man comes short of this end who attains the complete and harmonious development of the nature given him by God? For if man is really God's image, and not the devil's, then what other glorification of God can we effect than by striving to retain the image after which we have been fashioned? Now, if we render glory to God in proportion to the perfection in which we retain His likeness, and if our enjoyment of Him is to be estimated by the force of our revolt against all that is unlike Him, there is no other destination for man than to wage an unwearying war against all that impedes the full, free, and harmonious growth of his own God-like nature.

In accordance with these principles, the value of any sphere of human activity, in its bearing on the purposes of man's destiny, will be estimated by the absence of those influences which are calculated to hinder, and the presence of such as are calculated to incite, the complete and harmonious development of the various powers with which his nature is endowed. The purely external sphere of human life can be affected but accidentally by the circumstances of any particular profession; and, therefore, we may pass at once to the consideration of those influences in our profession which are fitted to educe whatever is highest in man's inner life.

It is impossible, in this consideration, to avoid separating a clergyman's theological and his practical life. I shall draw your attention firstly to the theological, because it is most strictly con-

nected with the work of our Society. Our task, then, is to estimate the value of theology as a discipline for intellectual culture. Let us place before us the highest type of mind, and analyze the elements of its greatness. What is the result? We certainly find one feature of mental excellence predominant over all others. Even in common life the general standard, by which the truest worth of any mind is estimated, is the comparative amount of thought which it is capable of exerting. The more exact and thorough our psychological investigations are, we shall be forced to recognize the accuracy with which common opinion represents the truth in this matter. The energy of every great mind, in all its various modes, is largely due to that form of intellectual power which is known in our systems under such various names as Judgment, Understanding, the Elaborate Faculty, the Faculty of Comparison, but in common speech is usually styled Thought, in its highest and most restricted sense. It is this force that elaborates those creations of the poetic imagination which distinguish it from mere representation; it is the same force which, as it

"Flashes from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,"

strikes out those happy comparisons which delight us in the wit of the humorist, and unfold to us the higher relations of truth in the invention of the philosopher. For the purposes of mental education, therefore, every study must be valued in proportion to the amount of thought which it is fitted to evoke; and if it can be shown that the theological sciences are such as to demand the very strongest efforts of thought, then the profession, which is specially called to the study of these sciences, is not only not inconsistent with the noblest intellectual life, but is a desirable sphere of activity for the man who aspires to a life of so high an aim. In leading a proof of this it is unnecessary to glance with the slightest disparagement at a single other branch of intellectual labor, or even to institute a comparison between theology and any other science. The truth of my position will emerge on a very cursory investigation into the nature of the theological sciences themselves.

It is not entirely unworthy of consideration, as a first general view of theological studies, that Christianity, as the absolute religion, maintains all religious life, so far as really religious, and all truth, so far as really true, to be Christian life and Christian truth; it denies, therefore, that any intelligent thinking or any noble living can possibly be out of harmony with it. In consequence of this sublime claim, the scientific study of Christianity involves a reference, more or less direct, to every possible object of human knowledge. No other science, therefore, can demand such a severe and thorough investigation of the relations in which the separate truths of all the sciences are comprehended as the harmonious parts of one intellectual system.

But, to descend from this general position, the special objects of theological study must give the strongest conceivable impulse to the very highest energies of thought. The theologian, if he would be honest to his calling, cannot avoid carrying his researches to the limits themselves of all speculation. Fearful of no consequence so much as of corrupting his conscience by dishonesty to the questionings of his own mind, and untouched—as he, who would preach eternal truth, should surely be—by temporal temptations to tamper with his honesty, the theological student must be prepared to face the task of searching into the very grounds of being,—of searching even whether all that seems to be is not merely a meaningless phantasmagory of being, and we ourselves but ephemeral trifles that have been unintelligibly tossed up in the midst of the universal illusion. No one need fear lest I may exalt too highly the value of such speculation. I am speaking now of the results it has achieved, not in the discovery of established truths, but in the education of the mind. Whether speculation will ever permanently settle the final problems of human knowledge need not be discussed here; it is a question which cannot be answered but by speculating on it; only by speculation can the worth or worthlessness of speculation be known. Moreover, notwithstanding the assertions of modern Phenomenalism on the fruitlessness of all enquiry into these final problems, it surely can never cease to be a question of interest

for all men, whether it is not a mere poetical figure, but the sober, scientific truth which some declare it to be, that

> "We are such stuff
> As dreams are made on, and our little life
> Is rounded with a sleep?"

But apart from all this, it is impossible to doubt the vigor of the discipline which is involved in grappling with these problems. The uttermost of the force within him is called into play by the man who girds himself for such an intellectual conflict, who wrestles with the universe, as the patriarch of old with the angel, to wring from it the secret of that name which tells its origin and destination.

But it is not only with speculative theology, strictly so called, that the philosophic theologian has to do; the various other departments of philosophy are also fields of his enquiry. It is impossible, as it is unnecessary, here to do more than remind you that a large number of the problems which occupy the pages of our systematic writers are capable of solution only by a previous settlement of analogous questions in psychology, ethics, political philosophy, or the philosophy of religion. We may, therefore, turn to the numerous other fields of study, to which we are invited in our vocation. It is certainly an important fact, in view of the subject which I am discussing, that few branches of science afford higher culture than philology, and that without it there can be no intelligent appreciation of our sacred writings. What is involved in a thorough philology you will not expect me to explain here, though it is well worth remembering that the application of its principles to the philology of any particular language implies some acquaintance with comparative philology, and that this science seems now to be inseparably bound up with the science of comparative mythology, which is already on the way to discover those conditions of early attempts to express thought which gave birth to the myths that we find in the infancy of every people. But the particular languages, which the theologian is required to study, are such that if the philologist

had wished to choose from the dialects of men two which, by reason of their opposite peculiarities, might afford scope for the speculations of his science, he could hardly have pitched upon any better suited to his purpose. The speech of that ancient people, who still live for us in the books of the Old Covenant, presents numerous peculiar attractions to the student of philology. With its scarcity and simplicity of words and their forms; with its still greater scarcity and simplicity of syntactical modifications; with its destitution of those refinements which are necessary to the exactness of philosophic, and the measured rhythm of poetic, expression; how far does it stand from the Greek, whose elaborate verbal and nominal modifications, whose equally elaborate refinements of phraseology, bring us back to it as still the most successful effort at a philosophic or artistic employment of language! But language is only one of the forms in which the life of a people manifests itself. No language, therefore, can be scientifically studied apart from the character of the people who spoke it, apart from the influences which operated in the formation of their character, and which must be traced through all the evolutions of their history. Is it possible to conceive a nobler or more fascinating sphere of enquiry than that which is thus opened up to the student of theology? He is thus carried back to the earliest beginnings of human history; he is invited to search the questions which arise in the criticism of ancient historic records, the problems which bear upon the origin and growth of social and political organizations, upon the wanderings and settlements of different races, upon the formation and development of kingdoms, through the various spheres of their political, religious, and literary life, with the influences which they exerted on one another. He is specially called to study the history of one people, and the work which was given it to accomplish in the evolution of the divine world-plan. In the connection of this people with Egypt, he must become acquainted with that wonderland of the ancient world, whose place in human history seems only now beginning to be truly estimated. The relation of Israel to the Persian and other old empires which stretched over the

vast plains of Western Asia, must form another subject of study to the theological student; and before he can pass to the times of the New Covenant, he must follow the Macedonian conqueror through the changes which he effected in the kingdoms of the East, and trace the operation of the Greek influences which he brought with him into Eastern countries, and especially the modifications which these produced in the literature and life of the Jews.

It is a great disappointment to be unable even to point out the most prominent objects of interest that rise up before us in imagination throughout the extensive field to which we are thus introduced by the connection of Judea with Greece. I am also unable to do more than remind you that the times of our Lord are unintelligible without an acquaintance with the history of Rome and with the condition of the Roman empire at the date of His birth. We are thus carried on to investigate the gradual inroad of Christianity into the forms of life which preceded it, and the influence which it has exerted on all history down through these eighteen centuries; for, during the greater part of this period, the history of the civilized world has been the history of Christianity, and the history of European speculation has been the history of the development of Christian dogma.

These brief hints have left you to fill up for yourselves the wide ranges of intellectual work that are thrown open to the student of theology. I wish I could have had time to sketch some of the prominent features in the practical work of our profession, in order to exhibit the advantages which it also possesses for assisting us to realize in our earthly life the life of the true divine. My chief design has been to vindicate the rank of theological studies among the higher intellectual pursuits; and the remarks I have made express the answer which I have long silently given, not only to the common insinuations of literary snobs, but to the more serious assertions of more earnest men, and to the still more serious fears which have risen at times within my own mind, that the higher intellectual life must be abandoned in entering the clerical profession. I hope that the

spirit in which these remarks have been made may be caught in fuller measure by those whom we, that are now closing our academical career, shall leave behind us in the Society; and while we now bid you and each other farewell, we do so in the hope that, if the Beneficent Ruler of our destinies should ever demand a union among us in some wider sphere for accomplishing any of the purposes which the future history of His Kingdom may require, we may find that the companionship, which has grown up among us here, has already formed a basis of common sympathies, on which we shall be able at once to understand each other, and to go forth, that we do together, and do with all our might, whatever work we may be called to perform.

